

NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUND 5-6310
FRED BROWN/NEW DELHI

DECEMBER 11, 1978

BANGLADESH POLITICAL PROBLEMS

ANNCR:

IN BANGLADESH, PLANS FOR HOLDING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS JANUARY TWENTY-SEVENTH HAVE RUN INTO SERIOUS DIFFICULTY, WITH AN ANNOUNCEMENT BY ALMOST ALL MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES THAT THEY WILL BOYCOTT THE VOTING. FROM OUR SOUTH ASIA BUREAU CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN SENDS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

SO FAR, FOURTEEN POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE JOINED IN THE BOYCOTT, INCLUDING BOTH WINGS OF THE AWAMI LEAGUE, THE PARTY OF THE LATE SHEIK MUJIBUR RAHMAN. BEFORE A RECENT SPLIT, THE AWAMI LEAGUE WAS THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST AND BEST ORGANIZED POLITICAL FORCE. THE LATEST TO JOIN THE BOYCOTT ARE THE PRO-MOSCOW BANGLADESH COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE PRO-PEKING BANGLADESH PEOPLE'S LEAGUE. STILL TO ANNOUNCE ITS STAND ON THE BOYCOTT IS THE BANGLADESH MOSLEM LEAGUE OF KHAN ABDUL SABUR KHAN. AS RECENTLY AS TWO WEEKS AGO, MISTER KHAN TOLD THE VOICE OF AMERICA HE EXPECTED TO CONTEST THE ELECTIONS, ALTHOUGH LIKE THE OTHER POLITICAL LEADERS HE WAS UNHAPPY WITH THE FAILURE OF PRESIDENT ZIA RAHMAN TO ACCEPT CERTAIN DEMANDS FROM THE POLITICIANS. THESE ARE: AN END TO MARTIAL LAW BEFORE THE ELECTIONS, RESTORATION OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY AS ENVISAGED IN THE NINETEEN SEVENTY-TWO CONSTITUTION, UNCONDITIONAL RELEASE OF ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS, RETIREMENT OF PRESIDENT ZIA FROM THE ARMY IF HE WANTS TO ENGAGE IN POLITICS AND RESTORATION OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS THROUGH REPEAL OF SO-CALLED BLACK LAWS THAT REGULATE THE PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS.

IN ANNOUNCING THE JANUARY TWENTY-SEVENTH DATE FOR THE ELECTIONS, PRESIDENT ZIA SAID HE WOULD LIFT MARTIAL LAW IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE POLLING. HE CONTENDED THAT LIFTING MARTIAL LAW BEFORE THE ELECTIONS WOULD CREATE A VACUUM IN WHICH IT MIGHT NOT BE POSSIBLE TO GUARANTEE FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS. PRESIDENT ZIA CONTENDED THAT HIS GOVERNMENT ALREADY HAS RESTORED PRESS FREEDOM AND HAS RELEASED MORE THAN TEN THOUSAND POLITICAL PRISONERS SINCE COMING TO POWER. HE DID NOT SAY HOW MANY PERSONS REMAINED UNDER DETENTION.

PRESIDENT ZIA, THIS PAST WEEKEND, MADE CLEAR HE HAS NO INTENTION OF GOING BACK ON HIS DECISION TO HOLD THE ELECTIONS. TOURING THE COUNTRYSIDE ON BEHALF OF HIS NEWLY-FORMED BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY, THE PRESIDENT URGED THE PEOPLE TO TURN AWAY FROM WHAT HE CALLED THE OLD POLITICS OF CHAOS, CONFUSION AND DIVISION. HE SAID IT WAS THE DUTY OF EVERY CITIZEN TO PARTICIPATE IN THE POLLS. PRESIDENT ZIA AND HIS MINISTERS HAVE SUGGESTED THAT ANY BOYCOTT OF THE ELECTIONS WOULD BE TANTAMOUNT TO BETRAYAL OF THE NATION.

BACKING UP HIS WORDS WITH ACTIONS, PRESIDENT ZIA HAS NOW SIGNED A NEW DECREE OUTLAWING ALL BANGLADESH POLITICAL PARTIES WITH OUTSIDE LINKS, RECEIVING FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM ABROAD OR POSSESSING ARMED UNDERGROUND CADRES. VIOLATORS OF THE BAN COULD BE IMPRISONED FOR UP TO TWO YEARS. THERE WAS NO IMMEDIATE INDICATION WHICH OF THE COUNTRY'S TWENTY-ONE REGISTERED POLITICAL PARTIES MIGHT BE AFFECTED BY THE DECREE.

IT'S NOT CLEAR HOW SUCCESSFUL THE COUNTRY'S BADLY-SPLINTERED POLITICAL PARTIES WILL BE IN ORGANIZING THE ELECTION BOYCOTT. BUT IT IS ALSO NOT CLEAR HOW, IN THE FACE OF THE BOYCOTT CALL,

PRESIDENT ZIA WILL BE ABLE TO PERSUADE OUTSIDERS THAT THE ELECTIONS HAVE CREDIBILITY, AND THAT, AS HE HAS PUT IT, THEY REPRESENT THE FINAL STEP IN THE PROCESS OF THE COUNTRY'S DEMOCRATISATION.

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